

A Papuan Relic.

By the liberality of Mr. W. Trotter, of Murua (commonly called Woodlark Island) the writer has been fortunate enough to obtain evidence confirmatory of a late conjecture of his, one which man possibly or probably have seemed to require additional proof. Certain objects noticed in the last number of these annals (No. 6), under the heading "Papuan Charms," were thought to shew that in the past New Guinea has been peopled by a race on a higher level of civilization than that of its present occupants. Support of the inference now comes in the shape of a stone pestle or muller, which not only tells the same tale of superior art, but may through its environment, yield some indication of the degree of antiquity allowable to its artificer. The implement, represented on Plate I, was met with under 3 feet of superficial gravel at the bottom of the same extinct river-bed whence were extracted the fossil bones of dugong, turtle, and crocodile described in the number aforesaid. In form it reminds one most of a short hyacinth glass with a bulb of the plant in its usual position. Its base is, as it should be, gently and regularly convex; its conical body, suddenly dilated above into a thick collar, affords to the hand a steady firmness of grip; an obtusely conical and quite unnecessary knob, surmounting the collar, testifies to an impulse of the artistic faculty. As a whole, it is as symmetrical as one could expect of a work done without rule and callipers; the periphery of a transverse section taken across the plane of any of its short diameters deviates but little from a true circle.

Its dimensions are these:—Total height, 169mm.; diameter at base, 88mm.; at neck, 43mm.; of collar, 54mm. The material chosen for its manufacture by its designer was a fragment of diabase or diorite, the rock which an obliging correspondent, Mr. J. Taaffe, informs us is the prevailing geological feature of the island, and apparently the toughest stone to be met with there. In the implement it is now decomposed and partly kaolinised to a depth which cannot be ascertained without risk of injury to the specimen. Its surface is roughened by the granules of an ochreous crust, 3mm. in thickness, derived from the ferruginous constituents of the rock or from the superincumbent gravel. Where the surface has been abraded by the pick, the colour of greenstone is still, though faintly, visible.

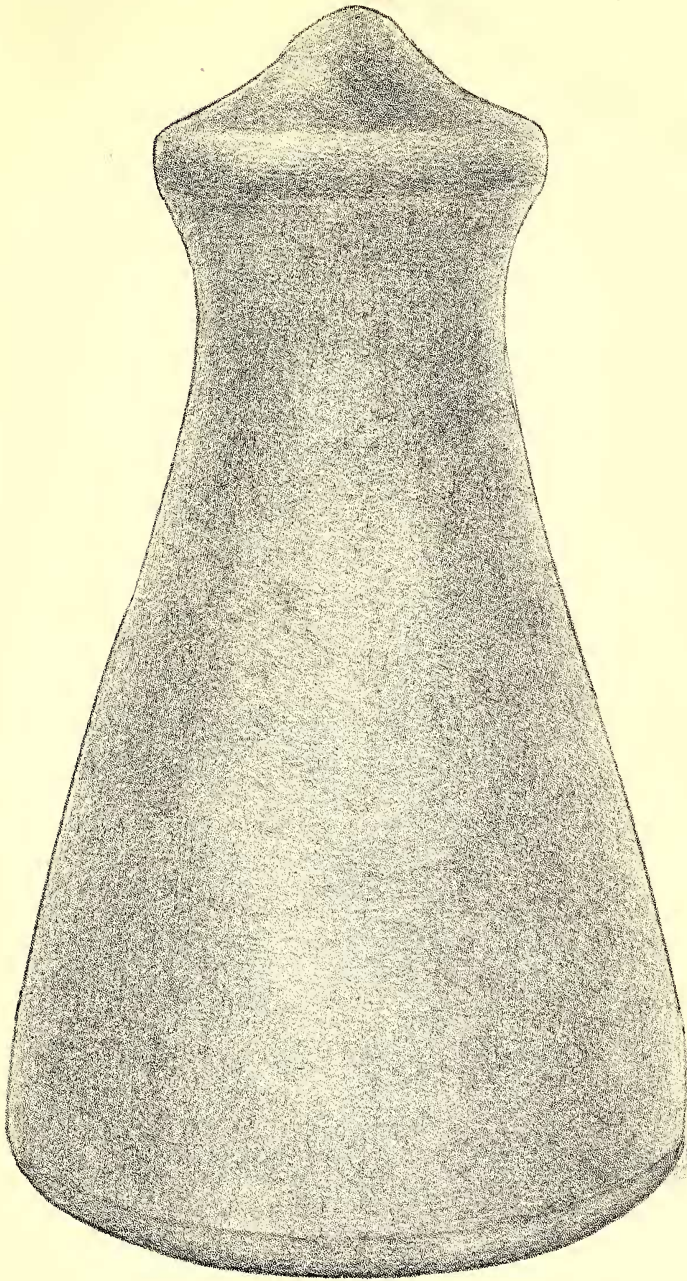
What purpose this well-made instrument was made to serve can hardly be a matter of doubt; it is sufficiently indicated by the convexity of its base and handy form of its body. On placing it in the hands of a friend, he at once grasped it as the man who made it, or his wife, grasped it, and made with it, as did they, the motions proper for the reduction of substances to powder. On the other hand, the natives of the island, when shewn the relic, declared that they did not know the use of it; a fact by no means surprising, considering their only substitute for it, a natural pebble. Had they found the

strange object themselves, they would have made a fetish of it, without doubt.

We hear from Mr. Taaffe that a second specimen of the implement has been discovered in the river bed. This we have not yet had an opportunity of examining, but our informant states that it is very similar to the one described, only differing from it somewhat in shape.

Bethinking ourselves of a caution accepted by experience, we must admit that the burial of products of human handiwork and of fossil bones in the same river bed does not of itself prove that the two are of the same age, unless they were found in contiguity, immediate or approximate. Awaiting information on the point, we must meanwhile be content with probabilities, and these are in favour of contemporaneity. If "prehistoric man" in Europe was early enough and artistic enough to leave us spirited gravings of the mammoth and horse of his day, and carvings of reindeer worked out of their own antlers; if the pestle used as a fetish in New Guinea is of the same type as tertiary pestles found under the soil of California; if man in Australia made implements out of the bones of extinct beasts and left them to be found under lava, at a depth of 238 feet; we can hardly doubt that he has survived in New Guinea while some other animals, at least, have succumbed to unfavourable changes in their environment.

Woodlark Island lies at a distance of 180 miles E.N.E. of the extreme Southern point of British New Guinea. Its short diameter measures 15 miles; its long one, trending parallel to the New Guinea coast, 41 miles. Nearly one-half of its surface is covered with masses of coral lying in the utmost confusion and permeated by modern watercourses. The chief of the latter crosses the island near the middle of its length, and is the old river bed in which the fossil bones and the present relic were found. It is described as of great width and depth, carrying, therefore, such a stream as Horace may have imagined when he wrote the line which has proved more famous than truthful: "Labitur et labetur," &c. A channel of so great capacity must have drained a watershed vastly greater than the 500 or 600 square miles of the Island. In which direction—east or west—lay that vanished land? Could the direction in which the river flowed be ascertained, the question would have a ready answer, if not a quite perfectly satisfactory one. The occurrence, on the mainland of New Guinea, of relics alike to this pestle in its teaching, naturally suggests that, during the age of the people that made them, the lost land stretched towards the west, possibly uniting the two islands. These records of their industries, sunken in a river bed or converted into supernatural agencies by a credulity which is far from being extinct among ourselves, have survived the ages occupied by the submersion of eastern New Guinea and the subsequent rise of Murua. That Murua has risen, from a moderate depth at least, we know for certain. Our correspondent, Mr. Taaffe, informs us that around the middle of the island rises hilly land to a height of over 300 feet, and that at that level are to be seen sea shells—notably huge clam shells.



New Guinea Pestle